

## A Final Glory: The Novels of James Salter

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"The favor of all the novel writers in the world," wrote William Dean Howells, "could not solely make a novel successful; and yet if the novelists liked it I should say it was surely a good novel" (17). Howells knew firsthand the inconsequentiality of peer adulation upon popular success. Both he and his eminent contemporary Henry James published to the applause of their fellow novelists and the indifference of the public. The popular novelists of their day were Marie Corelli, Ian Maclaren, Anthony Hope, F. Hopkinson Smith, all long since buried in the graveyard of forgotten authors. Meanwhile Howells and James have reincarnated into golden birds of the literary aviary, nesting in every respectable bookstore in the country and exhibited before successive generations of students. Unquestionably this transformation depended, to some extent, on the response of a third component of the reading audience, the academic, as it accorded their novels the esteem of critical scrutiny. Ultimately, then, success depends upon all three estates of the reading audience: peers, public, and academy—each exerting its peculiar influence on the other two.

One wonders how many novelists writing today have earned the respect of their fellow novelists, only to have their books collect more dust than fingerprints. We in the academy usually hear of such only after they have made a public splash or have been adopted by a sympathetic school of criticism. William Kennedy was such an unknown, admired in small literary circles exclusively, until Saul Bellow persuaded Viking to publish *Ironweed* after its editorial board had already rejected the book. The rest is the stuff of dreams: an enterprising editor hits upon a unique marketing approach, and the book becomes a best-seller and wins the Pulitzer Prize. Anne Tyler had published eight novels and was simply a writer's writer before her *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* got a rave review on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*. Her next novel enjoyed equal acclaim and popularity, and her early books were reprinted and widely distributed. This so-called "breakout phenomenon," as described by Joseph Barbato in his *Publishers Weekly* article, was exemplified most dramatically when John Irving's *The World According to Garp* appeared in 1978 and swept the imagination of the country, vaulting Irving from obscurity to fame and

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fortune. The most recent breakout author is Pat Conroy, *The Prince of Tides* becoming his first best-seller after sixteen years of writing and four books known to the public primarily through the films based upon them. These are all worthy writers, whose success is well deserved. What interests me here, however, is the merit of equally, perhaps more, worthy writers who have not yet basked in the warm glow of public appreciation. Among the ranks of the underappreciated are Cormac McCarthy, Vance Bourjaily, John Ehle, and James Salter. A case could be made for each of these writers, but it is Salter who most exactly fits both halves of Howell's dictum, a perfect illustration of peer favor and public disinterest.

In 1984, *Esquire* said that Salter "has been more appreciated by more serious literary authors than has any other modern American writer" (101). Authors Saul Bellow, Graham Greene, Irwin Shaw, Mavis Gallant, Reynolds Price, Glenway Wescott, Joy Williams, and John Irving all have praised Salter's fiction enthusiastically. Price said Salter's *A Sport and a Pastime* (1967) is "as nearly perfect as any American fiction I know" (3). Bellow lauded Salter as "exceptionally talented," adding that such talent "turns me around, gives me new bearings, changes my views somewhat." Joy Williams hailed *Light Years* (1975) as "an absolutely beautiful, monstrous, important book, one that I can simply not remove from my mind or my life." And Mavis Gallant flatly called Salter "a marvel," who "knows an uncanny amount about women. . . ." Short stories by Salter have been selected for the O'Henry collections of *Prize Stories* in 1970, 1972, 1974, and 1984, for *The Best American Short Stories* in 1984, and for *American Short Story Masterpieces* in 1987. His five novels, dating back to 1956, have been favorably reviewed for the most part. James Wolcott, writing in *Vanity Fair*, called Salter "the most underrated underrated writer . . . whose best novels are . . . all brilliant" (16). And yet all of this praise, as Howells had foreseen, has not led to what the world calls success. Salter's novels have not sold well, *Solo Faces* (1979) being his top seller at about 8,000 copies. All five books had dropped out of print, even paperback reprint, until North Point Press recently issued new editions of *A Sport and a Pastime* and *Light Years*. In order to find even reading copies of Salter's first two novels, *The Hunters* (1956) and *The Arm of Flesh* (1961), one must travel to obscure libraries in Florida, Minnesota, or Georgia.

Salter's lack of success, moreover, extends beyond the realm of mass popularity. The academy has been as indifferent as the masses. Since the time of his first novel in 1956 to the present, only two entries on Salter have appeared in the MLA Annual Bibliography, both in 1982. One referenced a fine attempt by Margaret Winchell Miller in *The Hollins Critic* to introduce Salter to the academic community. The other noted my own essay in Armand Singer's *Essays on the Literature of Mountaineering*, which argued that *Solo Faces* is not only head and shoulders above the mass of mountain fiction, but fits squarely and honorably within the American literary tradition. Before and after 1982, the academy has ignored Salter. No mention of him was made in James Vinson's *Contemporary Novelists* (1982), which featured sketches of over 600 writers. Nothing about Salter appears in recent books about contemporary American literature

such as Joseph Epstein's *Plausible Prejudices: Essays on American Writing* (1985) or Daniel Hoffman's *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Literature* (1979). Even Frederick Karl's *American Fictions 1940-1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation* (1983) overlooks Salter completely, despite its pretentious subtitle.

Why the critical neglect? Is James Salter destined to remain strictly a writer's writer? Will he continue to be read by subscribers to *Esquire*, the *Paris Review*, and *Grand Street* in the same fashion that an actress in his story "The Cinema" reads the lines of her part: "They were like shoes. She tried them on, they were nice, she never thought who had made them" (28)?

A portrait of a novelist in one of Salter's stories, "Via Negativa," bears more than a little resemblance to him or to any writer who plugs along without fame:

There is a kind of minor writer who is found in a room of the library signing his novel. His index finger is the color of tea, his smile filled with bad teeth. He knows literature, however. His sad bones are made of it. He knows what was written and where writers died. . . .

He's unknown, though not without a few admirers. They are really like marriage, uninteresting, but what else is there? His life is his journals. . . . His hair is thin. His clothes are a little out of style. He is aware, however, that there is a great, a final glory which falls on certain figures barely noticed in their time, touches them in obscurity and recreates their lives. His heroes are Musil and, of course, Gerald Manley Hopkins. Bunin. (117)

Salter's teeth are fine, his hair is curly and vigorous, and his admirers, as indicated above, are certainly more interesting than those of the minor writer in the story; however, at sixty-two he still awaits not only that "final glory which falls on certain figures" but even the standard recognition befitting a worthy and unique voice in American fiction.

Before discussing the quality of Salter's work, however, I'll situate him. He was born and spent his boyhood in New York City. He went to Georgetown University and West Point, then pursued a twelve-year Air Force career (1945-57), resigning after he published his first novel, *The Hunters*. Salter lived in Europe during part of that stint and then again afterward for two extended periods in provincial France. "Paris had an enormous appeal," Salter admitted to me. It was the city of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Ford Maddox Ford, and a host of American writers. Salter confesses to being caught up in the widespread literary admiration for these patron saints of expatriation. Although he never lived in Paris in the real sense, ten weeks his longest stay, the charm of Paris and Europe itself is reflected in Salter's stories (many of which are set abroad) and in his life style (shopping for supper, for example, as they do in France, *via* the daily excursion: tomatoes at one roadside stand, fresh corn at another, the right-sized new potatoes at a third location). And while he now lives on Long Island and winters in Colorado, he returns to Europe as often as possible. The identification with France remains strong enough for Salter and his wife Kay to have timed their visit to Paris two years ago with the birth of their son.

Salter's French connection is as decidedly literary as geographic. "Gide," he says, "influenced me greatly when I began to write novels" (Personal interview). He confesses a high regard for French literature, listing as exemplars Celine, de Montherlant, and Genet. On the American side, Thomas Wolfe, he recalls, exerted a greater spell than either Fitzgerald or Hemingway, the latter soon rejected for his offending primitivism and aesthetic though admired for his writing.

Salter writes largely out of his own experiences and observations. The first two novels, *The Hunters* and *The Arm of Flesh*, draw upon his Air Force years, first as a jet fighter pilot in Korea, then stationed at bases in Europe. Salter looks upon their writing as his apprenticeship. His third novel, *A Sport and a Pastime*, mines Salter's residence and travels in rural France, times both glowing and for native. *Light Years*, a novel of conjugal love and divorce, is modeled on a couple whose fictional breakup preceded their actual separation. The husband, like so many of the characters in Salter's short stories, is a type of artist, specifically here an architect. Himself a full-time writer since his resignation from the Air Force, Salter peoples his fiction with artist figures. The hero of his most recent novel, *Solo Faces*, even sees his mountain climbing as a kind of art. For this figure of Vernon Rand, an American climbing in France, Salter uses his own earlier climbing experiences and the real life model of Gary Hemming, who after mercurial feats in the French Alps, mysteriously self-destructed.

When I visited Salter on Long Island in the summer of 1985, he acted as tour guide, bringing me to local places of interest. The tour began at the cemetery in Sag Harbor, whose green lawns in their summer life roll gently around the testaments of death, where Balanchine is buried, Nelson Algren, and where the moving Monument to the Masters is erected, a statue of whalers being tossed about on the high seas by an attacking whale. Balanchine's art and the whalers' prowess are now only memories of a glory that has been swallowed in death. In the cemetery, however, these memories remain, like the strains played on Peter Quince's clavier in Stevens' poem, making "a constant sacrament of praise." Cemeteries hold a special interest for Salter. Later we passed another smaller one, and he pointed to the grave of James Jones. Only afterward did I realize that the day was emblematic of the abiding theme of Salter's fiction: glory achieved in the face of death. That afternoon, we swam in the ocean, cold and rough, and lay upon the sand under a hot sun. Supper filled the evening: martinis, fresh corn, tomatoes, wine, and open grill.

Salter's novels deal with glory—the glory of perishable life, its pleasures, its achievements, its loves, the glory of art, sex, meals, and place. His fictional perspective, clearly this-worldly, concentrates on those moments in the sun that both justify and transcend the passing nature of our physical existence. When Rand and Cabot in *Solo Faces* climb the Dru, we are told, "Glory fell on them lightly like the cool of the evening itself" (87). The climb was classic in its purity and directness, and bold in the originality of its line of ascent, thus establishing its perfection and aligning it in form with artistic achievement.

Glory is achieved always in the face of death, for Salter's fiction weaves glory and death, immortality and mortality, moments everlasting and fleeting. This creates a tension. His heroes are secular, as Margaret Miller points out, so they must quest for their immortalities through experience (3). These are the immortalities of the moment, the transcendent experiences that Emerson thought literature should express. They are always shown in the novels hedged in by time and its ravages. Even the young are not immune. Dean, the young American in *A Sport and a Pastime*, dies in an auto accident. Rand, after his triumphs, loses courage, a kind of death. Cabot is crippled and bitter. One comes away from the novels with an appreciation for both the splendor and the brevity of these moments of glory.

Salter's fiction falls squarely in the Emersonian tradition of American literature described by Richard Poirier in *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature*. In Poirier's view, the tradition has responded to the call of Emerson's Orphic poet to "Build therefore your own world." The major writers of the nineteenth century have defied the limitations of their environment and the inevitable conditions of defeat imposed upon them by this environment by expressing romantic visions of freedom and transcendence in their poems and novels. These visions of defiance, given historical precedence by the forefathers' successful conquering of a hostile environment, express themselves in images of the frontier. "Walden is the West for Thoreau," says Poirier. "On the pond he can build an environment for himself in which not only wilderness but also the civilizing technologies are made subservient to him" (17).

Cooper, Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne, Twain, James—the classic American writers—"really do try," Poirier asserts, "against the perpetually greater power of reality, to create an environment that might allow some longer existence to the hero's momentary expansions of consciousness" (15). The American authors render these special moments with all the authority and power their styles can command. The resultant passages (an appropriate word) express more of the author's heartfelt revelations than the overall structure of his work, which in most cases opposes and cancels out the numinous moments; for the authors are largely unable to resist the forces of the environment pressing in upon their creations.

Poirier's identification of this tradition in American literature and his description of its characteristics help us understand the context and the seriousness of Salter's fiction. Each of Salter's novels contains a central metaphor of the frontier, a *terra nova*, the exploration of which leads its hero to new levels of awareness and achievement. In the first two novels, it is the rarefied air of jet fighter pilots, at war over Korea in *The Hunters*, at peace in Europe in *The Arm of Flesh*. In *A Sport and a Pastime* the new land is paradoxically the old world of France, an atmosphere of freedom and exploration for young Americans abroad. *Light Years*, set on the banks of the Hudson River and Salter's most intensely American book, takes the river itself as focal image of the couple's changing consciousness. In *Solo Faces* the French Alps provide the central metaphor of romantic vision.

The latter novel's hero, the quiet, enigmatic Vernon Rand, is a character as vivid and as unconventional as the heroes of *Walden* and *Huckleberry Finn*. Rand has no interest in and respect for the ordinary life of nine-to-five work with its houses, cars, families, and dogs. The mountains are to Rand what Walden Pond was to Thoreau and the river to Huck. After scaling the Dru, Rand confirms his uniqueness: "When he climbed, life welled up, overflowed in him. His ambitions had been ordinary, but after the Dru it was different. A great, an indestructible happiness filled him. He had found his life" (89-90). Like Thoreau, who went to Walden so that when the time came to die he could not say that he had not lived and who found that life at Walden, Rand occupies the space meant to be his. He does it like Thoreau, alone, for after scaling the Dru with Cabot, "he left Chamonix by himself and for one reason or another began climbing that way" (131).<sup>1</sup>

Like the great characters in the American literary tradition, all Salter's heroes are essentially alone in their quests. Nedra in *Light Years* leaves her husband not to be with her lover, whom she also leaves, but ultimately to be by herself. In *The Hunters* the validity of the test that the fighter pilot undergoes is its solitariness: "You lived and died alone, especially in fighters" (202). The space Vernon Rand occupies in *Solo Faces*, the mountain heights, is as isolated as Thoreau's: "In the morning he woke among peaks incredibly white against the muted sky. There is something greater than the life of the cities, greater than money and possessions; there is a manhood that can never be taken away. For this, one gives everything" (132). This is the same solitary manhood that Emerson in "Self-Reliance" said "society is in conspiracy against." In Rand's case, it is an inviolable manhood that will remain intact long after his mountain days have faded: "He saw himself at forty, working for wages, walking home in the dusk. The windows of restaurants, the headlights of cars, shops just being closed, all of it part of a world he had never surrendered to, that he would defy to the end" (91).

In Salter's novels, the defiance of the environment includes not only the conventional meaning of that term, that is, all of the social forces aligned against the hero, but more significantly the inevitable undermining of the hero's aspirations for eternity by the encroachment of death. In *Solo Faces* Rand and Cabot defy death in their scaling of the Dru despite Cabot's almost fatal accident. The near impossibility of their achievement underscores the human will's dominance of its circumstances: "There is a crux pitch, not always the most technically difficult, where the mountain concedes nothing, not the tiniest movement, not the barest hope. There is only a line, finer than a hair, that must somehow be crossed" (81-82). They cross this pitch and reach the mountain's summit. Their success, however, is a momentary triumph within a larger movement. All climbers know that if they challenge the mountains long enough they will lose. One day on a

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1. For an expanded treatment of my comments about *Solo Faces*, see my contribution to *Essays on the Literature of Mountaineering*, from which I have drawn excerpts both here and later.

less than spectacular solo attempt, Rand simply gives in and turns back, recognizing that "something had gone out of him" (179). Time and nature ultimately conquer human volition. Later, back in America, Rand looks in the mirror at a face "he once would have scorned," knowing that "he was suddenly too old" (212). He had passed "the life of which he was the purest exemplar, which he would not spoil" (212). Rand's defeat, however, like that of his illustrious predecessors in American literature, does not vitiate the glorious moments of his earlier triumph.

Each of the other Salter novels plays a different variation on the theme of man's desire for glory in the face of death. *The Hunters*, a first novel that bears the decided imprint of youth, parallels the movement and spirit of *Solo Faces* (albeit without the accomplished style of the later book). Cleve Saville, experienced as a pilot but untested in combat, comes to the air war in Korea as if it were an authentication of manhood, wanting to prove himself the war hero his father expects him to be. He is both caught up in the war and repelled by the scramble for glory, an intensely competitive enterprise, each pilot's reputation growing by the number of stars he garners, every star a downed enemy aircraft. Saville's chief rival is an arrogant and opportunistic young pilot destined to become an ace, and beyond them both looms the legendary enemy ace, who has extracted the price of glory from many an aspirant. Saville meets the challenge of the Korean skies just as Rand met the challenge of the Alps, shooting down the enemy ace in solitary combat. Saville finds his glory, the thing he had dreamed, but he does not claim it. He credits the kill to wingman, Billy Hunter, whose plane had crashed short of the field, because "Hunter had once told him that he would rather have his [name] there [on the board of stars] than anything else in the world" (93). In so doing, Saville proves his superiority to his own vision of glory, fulfilling the one thing lacking in his manhood and leadership. By glorifying his dead comrade, Saville finds a vision more authentic than his original ambition.

*The Arm of Flesh*, Salter's second novel, also concerns fighter pilots, now in Europe after World War II. Experimenting with point of view, he uses over thirteen different first person narrators to tell the fragmented story, often in an unfamiliar idiom. There are so many speakers and so little differentiation in their speaking voices that no clear plot line develops, and the characters lack both substantiality and development. The novel is his only failure. Seriously flawed novels, one should remember, dot the early careers of even distinguished novelists: Hawthorne had his *Fanshawe*, Melville his *Mardi*, Fitzgerald *The Beautiful and Damned*, Sinclair Lewis a whole series of failures before the publication of *Main Street*.

*A Sport and a Pastime* is a hymn to "green, bourgeoisie France" (10). Through the wanderings of a young American man and a younger, small-town French girl, the novel plumbs the country's "secret life . . . into which one cannot penetrate, the life of photograph albums, uncles, names of dogs that have died" (10). France would be inaccessible, remote, and lifeless to Philip Dean without his affair with the beautiful, though cheap, Anne-Marie Costallat. She becomes the other, the person who illuminates travel, whom one always dreams

of meeting, and without whom the museums are tedious, the roads empty, and the restaurants a necessity. She provides Dean, twenty-four and a dropout from Yale, with a personal reference, hence perspective, rescuing him from the lost ranks of student sightseers. Architecture, mountains, great rivers, and villages must have a scale, and one that is emotional as well as numerical.

The novel depends greatly, in fact stakes itself, upon style and language, and in an even greater gamble upon making sexual encounters the recitative of the book rather than the aria. When Salter writes of "the secret life of France, into which one cannot penetrate," the sexual connotation is crucial. Passages of sexual exploration alternate with passages of travel. Sex becomes both a means and an analogy of the discovery of place. Anne-Marie, Dean's guide, translator, companion, and the emotional scale of his adventure in a foreign land, is also his mistress, and the contours and texture of her body signify for him the physical nature of the countryside itself. Nowhere has it been made clearer that travel is a sensuous experience—all sights, smells, tastes, sounds, and touches. Dean's exploration of Anne-Marie, as common and lovely as the French provinces, becomes an *explication du texte* of the country itself. Her body is cathedral and cave, restaurant and market place, courtyard and cheap hotel. On one occasion after they have made love, "she falls asleep without a word. Dean lies beside her. The real France, he is thinking. The real France. He is lost in it, in the smell of the very sheets" (61).

Descriptions of the sexual encounters are spare but frankly erotic, charged by the gradual encroachment onto forbidden territory, the violation of each taboo carrying Dean into a deeper intimacy with the life around him. There is something illicit, obsessive about his affair, raising images we repudiate until they are transformed by the blinding apparition of the experience itself into a world purer than our own. We are disarmed by both the gratuitousness and the totality of their sexual love, observing Dean's passage from alienation to bliss, his metamorphosis from stranger to king: "Mythology has accepted him. . . . He tumbles into the damp leaves of love, he rises clean as air" (85). The novel thus celebrates the twin glories of sexual love and place as they are revealed to be analogous experiences. After Dean has confided the details of his sorties to the narrator, the latter ruminates, "Somehow I have the impression that he is laying it all before me, the essence of this glorious life he has spent in France" (174).

Two qualifying revelations about "this glorious life" are contained in the novel: it is not accessible to everyone, and it will not last. The first idea is communicated through Salter's sophisticated narrative technique, using a first person narrator who admits his untrustworthiness: "I am not telling the truth about Dean, I am inventing him. I am creating him out of my own inadequacies, you must always remember that" (85). Writing in 1967, Salter exhibits the post-modernist trait of exposing the fictiveness of the fiction. The effect of the technique, however, does not decrease the reality of Dean as much as it increases the reality of the narrator, sharpening the reader's perception that, like the narrator, "one must have heroes, which is to say, one must create them" (191). The inadequacies of the narrator, out of which he admits to be partially inventing Dean, express an essential longing of mankind for the ineffable, in this case



Dean's "power which I cannot identify, which is flickering . . . this power which guarantees his existence, ever afterwards, even when he is gone" (179).

We must not forget that this was to be a *wanderjahr* for the narrator himself, ripe with the hope of fulfilling his own erotic and pastoral longings. Cristina in Paris, Madame Picquet, and Anne-Marie herself all slip past the scope of his desire. Of the latter, he insists, "It was by glances, exhausted glances across a nightclub that I discovered her, and I confirmed her only in silence, in stealth . . ." (100). His silence and stealth are juxtaposed with Dean's words and action. Dean preempts what was to be the narrator's own season of rural delight, while the narrator recedes to spectator, as such a perfect vehicle for telling the story on the practical level and a perfect audience surrogate on the imaginative level, allowing us to see ourselves in our various distances from the magical figure of Dean, carefree, natural, and as acceptable as the elements themselves. Like the narrator we have to say, at least for the duration of the novel, "My own life suddenly seems nothing, an old costume, a collection of rags, and I walk, I breathe to the rhythm of his which is stronger than mine" (65). Like the narrator we are left standing in an ordinary, unthrilling, banal world with memories that will not fade.

The perishability of "this glorious life" is the novel's second qualifying insight. Dean's old car, the marvelous Delage, becomes

the very symbol of his existence . . . its dark shape fleeing along the road, that great, spectral car which haunts the villages. . . . Journeys and intimations of journeys—I see now that he has always kept himself close to the life that flows, is transient, borne away. And I see his whole appearance differently. He is joined to the brevity of things. He has apprehended at least one great law. (116-17)

Dean's death is foreshadowed relatively early in the novel, so the later experience is viewed through this prism. It colors. We know that Dean is fully alive, and we also know that he will die. The book implies the equation with ourselves. Life is short, no matter if one dies at twenty-four or sixty-four. As the inscription from the Koran admonishes, "Remember that the life of this world is but a sport and a pastime . . ." (LVII 19).

The cover of the beautiful North Point edition of *Light Years* features an impressionist painting, "The Breakfast Room," by Pierre Bonnard. The scene is a table, covered with a white tablecloth, with breakfast dishes and food, all framed in the background by a glass door looking out over a second story porch and onto the brown-flecked greenery of large oaks. The painting captures the atmosphere of the novel and typifies the relative uneventfulness of the action, small, ordinary acts that mount eventually into cumulative significance.

There is no complete life. There are only fragments. We are born to have nothing, to have it pour through our hands. . . . One must be resolute, blind. For whatever we do, even whatever we do not do prevents us from doing the opposite. Acts demolish their alternatives, that is the paradox. So that life is a matter of choices, each one final and of little consequence, like dropping stones into the sea. (35-36)

*Light Years* is about the passage of time, both the eternity of moments and the way these have of slipping by, not only into the past but even into forgetfulness. The lives of Nedra and Viri Berland have burgeoned into the ripeness of late

summer. We see the fineness of the fabric they have woven: the beauty of their home on the banks of the Hudson River, the loveliness of their two daughters, five and seven years old as the novel opens in 1958, the delicate understanding behind their own relationship, and their relaxed community with friends who are constantly visiting or being visited. Viri, an architect, yearns for fame. He is "sensitive to lives that had, beneath their surface, like a huge rock or shadow, a glory that would be discovered, that would rise one day to the light" (34). Nedra, at the age of twenty-eight, possesses a beauty enormously influential on those around her; she is tall, luminous, "a woman with long legs, a graceful neck, on her forehead the faintest creases of the decade to come" (26). Nedra, however, is ambivalent about her body, for while she at times "felt its immortality," she knows it "would one day betray her" (115).

Nedra's superior grasp of reality and her greater capacity for action make her the novel's strongest character, indicating that Salter's themes cross gender lines. While the couple both have affairs, Nedra knows, long before Viri, that their marriage is dead, incapable of nourishing their deepest longings. During her and Viri's trip to Europe, she confirms how thoroughly her life has revolved around Viri and the girls and their home, and that this must change. Europe, its depth and variety, intensifies her awareness of the un-lived life within herself. "I don't want to go back to our old life," she casually tells him over dinner in a restaurant outside London (200). After their divorce she returns to Europe to find a degree of happiness in her solitude, her confidence, and in the effect she has on men: "She was an elegant being again, alone, admired. . . . It was the opening of the triumph to which her bare room in the Bellevue entitled her, as a school-room entitles one to dazzling encounters, to nights of love" (213).

Nedra's triumph is rushed by the flow of time. After her father's death she had sensed there was no longer a buffer zone between herself and death: "It was finished, done. Suddenly she felt it all through her like an omen. She was exposed. The way was clear for her own end" (149). Alone at forty-one, she struggles to preserve the remnants of her once electrifying beauty:

She stepped back. How to re-create that tall young woman whose laugh turned people's heads, whose dazzling smile fell on gatherings like money on restaurant tables, snow on country houses, morning at sea? She took up her implements, eye pencil, cucumber cream, lipstick the color of isinglass. . . . Finally she was satisfied. In a certain light, with the right background, the right clothes, a beautiful coat. . . . (208)

The most poignant of the pangs of time in this novel are felt by women. Because of her age, now forty-three, Nedra fails in her acting audition before the great director and teacher, Philip Kasine. She and her friend Eve and other women in the novel frequently are caught observing the changes in their bodies and revealing their most intimate fears of physical dissolution. Death, however, lurks in the background for women and men alike, sometimes breaking into the circle of their consciousness, as when a close friend of the Berlands, Peter Daru, contracts a rare disease and quickly dies. In the end, death claims Nedra herself. And symbolically Viri too, for he, who has thus far spent most of his time avoiding the unpleasant things Nedra had always faced head on (such as the problems

of their marriage), at the end of the novel calmly contemplates his own end. One of their daughters, Danny, already has two children; Franca likely will marry and follow suit. Probably they will construct lives more similar to, than different from, their parents'. Time goes on.

The book suggests that amidst the imperceptible rush of time occur moments of incredible and evanescent beauty. This theme is largely conveyed by what reviewers and critics alike call Salter's impressionist style (Miller 3). I would, in fact, press the analogy to painting even more. The impressionist painters used vivid colors to capture the beauty of mundane events. Their unrealistic hues and selective brush strokes allow the viewer to see familiar objects in a different way. Like the magician, the impressionists rely on the viewer's willing collaboration in the illusion of reality presented. Salter uses a similar technique. He creates a magical effect out of selected detail, cadence, and sound, conjuring up both the illusion of reality and its ultimately inexpressible beauty. Salter knows that his magic relies upon the reader's familiarity with the incommunicable experience itself, which can never be captured, no more than the visual artist can capture the magic of human vision, but can only be evoked.

Again, of course, this is Emersonian, for Emerson said that the poet differed from the mass of mankind only in his [*sic*] ability to put into words what others have experienced. He must write from his own experience and he must say it truthfully, and all men will know that it is so. Beneath this theory lies the assumption that out of the particularity of his own experience the poet calls forth the assent of common experience. This particularity need not be an exhaustive one, only such as is required to appeal to the inner experience of each reader. Salter plays an impressionist variation on Emerson's concept. His style uses bits and pieces of reality, like an artist using pigments and dots, to create the illusion of reality.

The days had lost their warmth. Sometimes at noon, as if in farewell, there was an hour or two like summer, swiftly gone. On the stands in nearby orchards were hard, yellow apples filled with powerful juice. They exploded against the teeth, they spat white flecks like arguments. In the distant fields, seas of dank earth far from towns, there were still tomatoes clinging to the vines. At first glance it seemed only a few, but they were hidden, sheltered; that was how they had survived. (73)

If we look at it too closely, we can see the individual brush strokes and the lack of elaborate detail. If we step back, however, we know that this is life, and we fill in the missing details as surely as our eye reconstructs the impressionist painting into a fully recognizable scene.

Another of *Light Years*'s insights into time, also arguably impressionistic, is the cumulative effect of our smallest actions. The pattern of Viri and Nedra's daily life leads to their ultimate fates, not simply their dramatic acts of unfaithfulness. The novel presents the affairs themselves as the result of other smaller, discrete actions, the accumulation of which becomes a kind of boredom. Given their individual capacities for passion, ambition, and adventure, and the ultimate lack of room within the worn path of conjugal life for these to be exercised, their affairs are natural outgrowths. Their life together shifts as surely as the banks of a river are altered by its underwater currents. The novel's

tone eschews the operatic. It portrays the believable burden of the mundane, the terrible consequences of the feelings we have over our bread-and-cheese in the morning and our gin-and-tonics at night. In this regard, the tone and method are reminiscent of Flaubert and of Joyce's *Dubliners*.

And finally the novel shows us time as the grim reaper, not only cutting down the endless days that our youthful imagination projects for us but even destroying the memories of the past. The years are light years because of their beauty, yes. But also because of their fragility, their rapidity, their evanescence. Nedra poignantly illustrates this as she tells Eve of her inability to remember the face of her early lover, who at forty brought her, a girl of seventeen, to the city of New York for the first time. This blurring of the past is part of the unavoidable toll of time which is the focus of the novel.

A previous title for the book was *Estuarial Lives*, and the book ends where it began, on the banks of the river, literally the Hudson River, but metaphorically the river of time, the river whose course changes inevitably and imperceptibly, the river fed by smaller streams, the river rushing all too rapidly to the sea:

He [Viri] reaches the water's edge. There is the dock, unused now, with its flaking paint and rotten boards, its underpilings drenched in green. Here at the great, dark river, here on the bank.

It happens in an instant. It is all one long day, one endless afternoon, friends leave, we stand on the shore.

Yes, he thought, I am ready, I have always been ready, I am ready at last. (308)

The contradiction between the last two statements mirrors the contradiction of life itself, lived always on the shore of this black river, always drawn into its passing current.

One comes away from Salter's novels with an appreciation for both the radiance and the transience of these moments of glory, an appreciation that derives largely from the author's style, which is marvelous, spare, and totally fresh. Richard Poirier asserts that "the classic American writers try through style temporarily to free the hero (and the reader) from systems, to free them from the pressures of time, biology, economics, and from the social forces which are ultimately the undoing of American heroes and quite often of their creators" (5). Salter writes in this tradition. His style is a defiantly new thing, clean and pure like Vernon Rand's climbing, unconventional in its purposeful use of sentence fragments and run-ons. "Every style," affirms Susan Sontag, "is a means of insisting on something" (35). Salter's style, like any author's, insists on different things at different times. But one of its characteristics is simplicity, insisting on the elemental things of life: light, morning, evening, ambition, food, drink, desire. It attends to experience, especially the experience of the senses, with extraordinary precision but without exhaustive particularity. His style is spare, but it is also lush, described by reviewers as lyrical and romantic, an effect achieved by rhythm, selection, and metaphor. When Dean for the last time has made love to Anne-Marie in *A Sport and a Pastime*, "kissing her shoulders, listening to her breath," Salter, in a single evocative brush stroke, captures the present disarray of the room and their lives and the significance of their past moments together: "Their poem is scattered about them" (183).

Another thing that Salter's style insists upon, which further attaches him to the American tradition, is the power of language itself. Nedra in *Light Years* reads a book on Kandinsky:

The book was in her lap; she had read no further. The power to change one's life comes from a paragraph, a lone remark. The lines that penetrate us are slender, like the flukes that live in river water and enter the bodies of swimmers. She was excited, filled with strength. The polished sentences had arrived, it seemed, like so many other things, at just the right time. How can we imagine what our lives should be without the illumination of the lives of others? (161)

This short paragraph both describes Salter's attitude toward the kind of writing that is moving (slender lines) and the ability of those lines to change our lives. His own lines constantly strive for such illuminations, usually the effect of a final sentence of a paragraph that crystallizes what has gone before, as exemplified by the previous passage. Aldous Huxley wrote, through the notebooks of Philip Quarles, in *Point Counter Point*: "the artistic problem is to produce diaphanousness in spots, selecting the spots so as to reveal only the most humanely significant of distant vistas behind the near familiar object" (247). Salter's style constantly attempts to produce diaphanousness, to reveal the human significance of vistas beyond the familiar. The following passage occurs in *Solo Faces* after Rand has made his celebrated climb and after he has spent his first night with Catherin:

He lay in bed. A womanly smell still clung to it. He could hear footsteps elsewhere in the house, they seemed aimless. Opening and closing of doors. The empty cups were on the floor. As if it had suddenly started, he noticed the ticking of her clock. He felt luxurious. He took himself for granted, his legs, his sexual power, his fate. A consciousness that had faded came to life. It was like a film when the focus is blurred and shifting and all at once resolves; there leaps forth a hidden image, incorruptible, bright. (96)

Like a Joycean epiphany, this moment after love brings a sudden clarity to Rand's mind. And in telling it, Salter is as careful as a poet in choosing the right details: bed, scent, footsteps, doors, cups, clock. Rand's supine position, the most relaxed possible, expresses contentment. The lingering female smell recalls the sensuousness of the previous night and allows its spell to remain. The footsteps, a reminder that he is not alone, also imply that most people must be up in the morning and getting ready for work, but not Rand. The opening and closing of doors become emblems of the physical intimacy the couple have shared and will share, and, as well, of the new door to self-clarity Rand is passing through. The most telling detail, Rand's hearing of the clock "as if it had suddenly started," signals that now out of the amorphous past of quiet desperation has emerged a definite present and promising future. It signifies the start of life and the importance of relationship; for what is time, according to the cosmologist, but the measure of motion? And motion can only be measured relative to something or someone else, in this case Catherin. Salter then lists the things Rand took for granted. His legs are the principal tools of his climbing. His sexual power underscores the importance of this night with Catherin as a part of and a channel for his self-realization, and it also foreshadows what will become the

last hope for Rand later, namely the final one of a string of women. His fate, as mysterious solo scaler of the highest peaks, suddenly materializes from nowhere. In fact, Rand has gone from nonentity to the legendary, pure American, the hidden image that all at once leaps forth like a film coming into focus, literally an epiphany. Rand discovers his deepest, truest self—that soul which Emerson believed to be our primary participation in the divine—in this image of a man willing to challenge the impossible and still not boast of it.

That Rand is ultimately defeated by forces outside and within himself links him all the more closely to the major figures of American literature. Vernon Rand follows in the wake of such unrooted wanderers in search of self as Captain Ahab, Huck Finn, Lambert Strether, and Jake Barnes. The defeat of these characters, however, as well as that of the protagonists in all of Salter's novels, does not erase the glory they have achieved in their most free, most transcendent moments, moments rendered visionary by the style of luminous passages in the novels. Indeed, James Salter's visions of glory deserve serious attention as worthy contemporary embodiments of this far-reaching Emersonian tradition.

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